

Crisis of Values and its Resolution in Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*

***Siddhartha Sharma**

Arun Joshi's third novel *The Apprentice*¹ delineates the agonizing predicament of the protagonist, Ratan Rathor, who feels puzzled and lost in a world full of anarchy, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. Its theme is akin to Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* where the protagonist undergoes a painful struggle to maintain faith with concept of justice and religion in a hostile environment of corruption. He feels powerless and estranged from his own self as well as his surroundings. Tapan Kumar Ghosh makes a telling remark:

... (he) is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi's exploration of human reality in *The Apprentice*.²

The novel is about an individual with a guilty conscience, "a man without honour ... without shame ... a man of our times" (147) trying to retrieve his lost purity and honour. Simultaneously it is a severe indictment of a rotten, rudder-less, materialistic society with its unprincipled amassing of wealth in defiance of the sanctity of means and its absurd pursuit of success in career. Thus, the novel is about the protagonist's conformity to, and victimization by a crooked and corrupt society, thereby lending it a wider social relevance.

Technically the novel bears a close resemblance to Albert Camus's

* Reader in English, Head, Dept. of Humanities & Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi Gramodaya University, Chitrakoot, Satna (MP)

The Fall, but thematically the most prominent influences conspicuous in the novel are those of the *Karmic* principle of the *Gita* and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

The narrative is a long confessional monologue addressed to a young college student from the Punjab by Ratan Rathor, a Government official who also hails from the Punjab. He recounts to the student the story of his fall over a period of three months during the time he was rehearsing for the NCC Parade on the Republic Day. The novel concerns the miserable plight of the contemporary man "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose". (74) Ratan Rathor, who is both the hero and the anti-hero of the novel, probes deep into his inner life and exposes the treachery, pettiness, chicken-heartedness and the degeneration of his own character. He is a man of the world, pragmatic to the core and rises in the hierarchy by making deals and sucking up to the power that be. It reminds us of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* by its painful presentation of the crises of values prevalent in the corrupt social and political scene. Coming face-to-face with the social reality, Ratan Rathor conforms to the phoney social norms and subsequently suffers spiritual sterility. Like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, he is brought to a tragic existence by the false values of contemporary society.

Like in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* Ratan Rathor too detains a young national cadet to narrate to him the gruesome details of his own hypocrisy, cowardice, corruption, degeneration, debauchery and, finally, his great betrayal. He holds his own portrait as a mirror to his contemporaries, "the image of all and of no one" (102), as Clamence calls it, and the narrative turns out to be "the aggregate of the vices of our whole generation in their fullest expression."³

The confessional note is persistent in *The Apprentice*. As Thakur Guruprasad remarks: "The narrator in this novel is an insistent

confessionalist; confession is a factor in his redemption."⁵ The protagonist reflects upon his wasteful past after Brigadier's death and gives us an insight into his degenerate soul to gain some perception of truth in life. His is a clean confession made possible through thorough cleansing of the soul.

A significant aspect of the novel is that Ratan Rathor fails to confess his guilt or crime before anybody except the young student for the latter reminds him of his father: "You look a little like him (Ratan's father), if I may take the liberty of mentioning. Fifty years younger, of course, but grave and clear-eyed. Not a wash-out like me". (8) His father's selfless sacrifice had made such an indelible impression on his psyche that it is to the image of his father that he is making this honest confession of his fall and degeneration.

Ratan is a child of double inheritance. He was brought up in an atmosphere of antithetical philosophies of life. On the one hand is the patriotic and ideal world of his father and on the other is the worldly wisdom of his mother. It was the age of Mahatma Gandhi, and under the magic spell of the Gandhian values like simplicity, honesty, selfless service and non-violence he gave up his career as a successful lawyer, gave away his property to join the freedom movement and is eventually shot dead while leading a procession. His father's advice keeps ringing in his ears: "To be good! Respected! To be of use!" (19) Ratan's mother, a tubercular woman, with a pragmatic attitude towards life tells him to earn money: "Don't fool yourself, son.... Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money". (20) She further tells him: "It was not patriotism but money—that bought respect and brought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws—but money was law unto itself". (20) Ratan is torn between these two conflicting choices—one shown by his idealist and patriotic father, the other by his practical mother.

Another person who influences him is his friend, the Brigadier. His memory is associated with the boyhood escapades amid idyllic setting, the cross-country they undertook together. He recalls how the Brigadier fought for Ratan when half a dozen miscreants accost him while the two were returning after one of their boyhood escapades. Ratan feels the Brigadier's selfless love for "...me who no one had ever fought for". (16) He felt "I was not alone amidst the sugarcane, abandoned on the planet". (17) This episode proves another contrast to his life after the "fall" which has resulted in the loss of his paradisiacal innocence.

Cowardice is the hallmark of Ratan Rathor's character. As his higher self goads him to emulate his father's example, his lower self dictates him to pursue, as his father calls, "careers and bourgeois filth". (33) A very ironic situation is created when he decides to join Subhash Chandra Bose's army: "I am very excited. I am on my way to greatness... about to lay the foundations of the glorious future". (21) As he set out on his promising journey, with every mile that he traverses, his courage gives in, and "sweating and exhausted, in sight of his destination, he sat in a mangrove and wept". (22) It was the moment when he fell prey to his lower self, indicative of the future that awaits him.

His tubercular mother advises him to seek a job in Delhi with the help of his father's friends who now were well established and had some clout in the political corridors. He goes to Delhi where to fail would have been "the sign of the greatest incompetence". (31) He makes a futile search for a job; wherever he went, he was "examined, interviewed, interrogated," only to be "rejected". (30)

Ratan realizes that martyrs like his father and the Gandhian values they had fought for have been replaced, as Victor Anant says, "by opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy and wit."⁴ It was a society devoid of any values. The nation his father had laid his life for, was a

nation "of frustrated men sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose". (74)

His sojourn for a few weeks at Delhi changed him altogether, as he confesses: "I had added a new ironic dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty-one a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham". (28) He finds himself in the middle of a crisis of values, and with this "all started to crumble". (26)

He soon learns the ways of the crooked world. He is able to procure a job of a temporary clerk in the department of war purchases. It is not through diligence and efficiency, but through obedience, docility, servility, flattery, cunningness and "shameless sucking up to bosses," that helps him reach higher echelons of power. Ratan frankly confesses which verges on Bacon-like aphorism: "Some survive through defiance, others through ability. Still others through obedience, by becoming servants to the powers of the world". (35) He is branded "a whore," "an upstart," by his colleagues, but this doesn't affect him as he has turned shameless. He tells the young student:

I am a thick skin now, a thick skin and a wash out but, believe me, my friend. I too have had thoughts such as these. But what was to be done? One had to live. And, to live one had to make a living. And, how was a living to be made except through careers. (41)

He becomes well-off and powerful but is still unhappy and dissatisfied. Once in a confused state he talks to his superior. He was confused by the ways of the world and confided his doubts and fears to the superintendent, his mentor. But the latter's reply leads to Ratan's confusion worse confounded: "You know, Rathor, he said, nothing but God exists. You can be certain only of Him". (45) He further adds, "There was no point in looking for truths aside from the truth of God. Money in the world always changed hands. God was only concerned

with what one did with the money". (45) But Ratan couldn't take an explanation that took no cognizance of the purity of means. His perplexity knew no bounds:

Was graft, in His eyes, the same as any other money? And what about the consequences, consequence for what was termed as the "character," of the giver and the taker? - Or, was 'character' just a myth that I had somehow picked up? (45)

To rise in life he had married the Superintendent's niece, got his job confirmed, and was upgraded as an assistant with a dozen clerks under him. Later, he is made an officer in the department. He marries and gets promoted, but suffers from humiliation. But Ratan Rathor is ambitious and exercises his choice to pursue his material ends. Now he readily accepts bribes, owns a car, a flat of his own, a refrigerator, and also twenty thousand rupees in the bank. But the irony is, the more he gets, the more he wants: "The more money I accumulated, the more I was dissatisfied and the more I was determined to enjoy life". (89)

But at the same time he remains guilt-ridden. He begins to act like a patriot and a true Samaritan. He talks about the miserable condition of the country, collects donations for the soldiers at the war-front. He even writes an article entitled "Crisis of Character". He reaches a stage where his hypocrisy knows no bounds. The tragedy is that he has been gradually sinking into the abyss of darkness, of corruption, exploitation and bourgeois filth, and yet he thinks he is swimming. Soon after this he confides to the young man a personal revelation: "You see, to cut a long story short, just before the war started I took a bribe. An enormous bribe. Yes, Mr. Crisis of Character took an enormous bribe. No more, no less". (60)

Just a month ahead of the Chinese invasion Ratan cleared a huge pile of useless war materials lying in Bombay. This results in the Brigadier's abandoning the post for which he is later court-martialled,

and in great melancholy commits suicide. He fails to pin-down the motive behind his act. He was in real need of some kind of consolation, and he seeks "solace from the annals of corruption". (112) He justifies his misdeed thus:

If I had taken a bribe I belong rather to the rule than the exception. Peons were frequently taking bribes. So were government officials and traffic policemen and railway conductors. A bribe could get you a bed in a hospital, a place to bury your dead. Doctors had a fee to give false certificates, magistrates for a false judgement. For a sum of money politicians changed sides. For a larger sum they declared wars. Bribery was accepted by factory inspectors, bank agents and college professors; by nurses, priests and chartered accountants; by all those who acted in the public interest. Men took the bribes to facilitate the seduction of their wives; women for seduction of other women. All this I knew and had known for twenty years. (112)

The words of a Member of Parliament shock him, in Ratan's words: "Nobody lost a war these days, the M.P. said. There were always compromises. To be candid he whispered who cared for the wilderness that we are quarrelling over". (86) What surprises him most is that Himmat Singh, the Sheikh "conducts his operation for neither money nor power but in order only to destroy". (81) Like Camus's Caligula, he is out to destroy the world that made a whore of his mother. Like Caligula, he derives sadistic pleasure in destroying "everything from top to bottom from one end of the continent to the other". (81)

The Sheikh tells Ratan: "This country had two kinds of people—the rulers and the ruled." (84) While the rulers were a phoney people, the ruled were "brainless." (84) But Ratan is afraid of accepting bribe for fear of losing respect in the eyes of the people; he sets his fear at rest: "There was no such book Rathor—what existed—was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money." (76) Still he fails to understand as to "why did I take that bribe?" (61) He

says, "Yet I was unhappy about this as if I had violated the code of hour." (15) Though he consoles himself by what he sees around—ministers, secretaries and officials sunk neck deep in corruption—he is worried about the sharp slump in people's morality. As Ratan says, "I felt choked, oppressed, rebellious but tied up totally in knots". (66) What elevates the novel from merely being socio-political treatise on post-Independence India is "the author's sense of the concrete and his eye on situation and character."⁶

He probes into his soul to know the reason behind his nefarious act, and recounts how "the gears began to slip" (67) after his country's "tryst with destiny". (62) After India's freedom, the people's dream of a prosperous and strong nation remained unfulfilled leading to disappointment. The corridors of power became a hot bed of politics and the fourth estate published incredible stories. Infringing the self-laid sanctified norms, the ministers began to give misleading statements in the Parliament. A new set of politicians and statesmen surfaced occupying the centre-stage: "So, they had appeared again. That is if they had ever left the scene in the first place. There was the public and there were They". (63) The English *sahibs* were only replaced by the brown *sahibs*: "We thought we were free. What we had, in fact, was a new slavery". (63) In the new national set-up money and power was the ruling motive with merit and decency thrown to the winds. In a nutshell, it was "a free-for-all. A great darkness. Blinding us. And blind following the blind. And everybody lying". (70)

He wants to know what he really is, if not a 'masterfaker.' Although he enjoys his life in Bombay, all the time he is conscious of the evils of the so-called elite suffers from, which is laid bare by the accounts of a party in Bombay:

A retired major-general was roundly abusing, in the filthiest of language, those who were fighting; some already dead. It seems to me that nearly everything I heard or said or did that evening was in one way

or another obscene. I was, in fact, at the peak of the dung heap that I had been climbing all my life. (85)

His fall is complete when once he "had merely walked into a brothel hounded by a strange disturbance". (89) His utter vacuity and dissatisfaction is complete. His soul had been rendered sterile by the perverted modern civilization and by his own inherent cowardice, and he saw his "soul turn to ashes". (75)

When Ratan expresses his apprehension regarding the disclosure of the deal, Sheikh taunts him:

You are a fool, he said. ...people thought there was a law book laid down by God which they must follow.... There was no such law-book, Rathor, he said, what existed, he said, was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money. (76)

His faithful wife, Geeta also turns out to be another mirror to him. She reminds one of the ladies in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Isabel Archer, the 'Lady,' an attractive American girl is married to a worthless and spiteful dilettante, Gilbert Osmand, who marries her for her fortune and ruins her life; but to whom she remains loyal in spite of her realization of his vileness. What Ratan and his likes had done resulted in India losing war against China. The Brigadier had to desert his post ignominiously for which he is to be court-martialled, who, not much later, in utter shame commits suicide. Although the Superintendent of Police detects his involvement and he is put behind bars, but is subsequently released on the interference of the Secretary and the Minister who were accomplices in the crime. Though he is released his guilty conscience haunted him — "Was I the murderer they said I was"? (109) He feels alone in this wide world which makes him "descend into madness," "immobilized, fuddled, tongueless, misunderstood, laughed at". (129)

However his attempt at consoling himself proves futile. For the Brigadier's death, Ratan makes himself fully responsible; but for his own fall and degeneration, Himmat Singh. Himmat Singh, the Sheikh is Camus's Caligula-like character — out to destroy the world. It was in Bombay that Ratan came to know a bit about this underground man. He would always mock the world with his rough and sarcastic voice. Though he had extraordinary intelligence, it was made perverse by unknown suffering. The Sheikh would carry out his operations stealthily not to make money but to destroy "everything from top to bottom, from one end of the continent to the other". (81) On one occasion while Ratan was recounting his childhood and his father's martyrdom, Sheikh asks him, "Was it not intriguing— that the son of a revolutionary should be doing what he was doing?" ... Why did I not admit, he said, that my father's death had meant nothing to me. Ratan was stunned to realize that his father's death had meant only one thing to him: it was "stupid and meaningless" (83) to get killed like that.

It was this enigmatic Sheikh who made Ratan realize "some parts of his life, leaving behind a heap of slush to be pondered over". (84) The darkest part of Ratan's confession comes on the night before the Republic Day, as he says, "a secret darker than the darkness of the night," (100) and the young man lends his keen ear to him.

He pays a visit the hospital to see the Brigadier but is denied admittance: "Great friends, they told him, were usually the most harmful".(95) When he encounters the anonymous multitude of maimed soldiers whose very respectable existence was at stake, he is shocked at the devastation he and his likes had wrought upon the soldiers. It is this encounter which impels him to be good: "I shall be good. I shall not be greedy. I shall not be afraid. I shall be decent". (103) To make good the loss he decides to confess, but when the moment comes to make amends, he retraces his steps. Next morning he is summoned to

the Police Station to confess his guilt, as the S.P. requested Ratan, unless he confessed, "there was no hope for the Brigadier". (116)

But the selfish and hypocrite Ratan does nothing to save his friend. A furious debate raged within him: "What good would the confession do? The men who have died have died. And even if it were to do good, why should I go and confess". (110-11) The debate between his conscience and his cocky self express, as Abraham says, "the archetypal pattern of conflict between good and evil which is typically Indian."⁷ Thus, he spends many sleepless nights on account of this. He even visits a temple to seek some solace and moral courage, but to his great dismay the malevolent tentacles of corruption had the temple as well in its grip. The priest, the agent of God, offered him bribe to save his son, a dishonest contractor, from punishment for having mixed too much of sand in the mortar. He was totally disappointed and now knew there was no remedy for his malaise.

Lastly, he gathers courage and decides to write down his confession but it is not a neat confession for he tones down every insinuation of his personal guilt and having "escape routes . . . to wriggle out of the net". (125) He wants to save the Brigadier but not at his own cost as he does not want to own moral responsibility for his crime. But at the appointed hour, he does not send it to the concerned authorities. But things wouldn't stand for want of Ratan's confession and resulted in the ultimate tragedy. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh sarcastically remarks: "The Brigadier could not wait for Ratan's martyrdom: he committed suicide."⁸

For the first time Ratan is confronted with death that leads to an honest appraisal of life. The sight of the shattered skull of the Brigadier shocked Ratan out of his self-complacency and illusions. He had played havoc with many lives, but when the pain of his dearest one was thrust in his face, he learns: "God is not mocked.... He has got a stick all right and he is not mocked and sooner or later, some place or another, he

still raps your knuckles". (129) He undergoes terrible loneliness through many days and nights: "No conversation, no visit of either friend or foe, no sleep, in spite of the sleeping pills that our good doctor gave me, no relief, no respite from the hands that pulled me steadily down towards those caverns where I felt certain, the Brigadier had gone". (130)

Ratan holds Himmat Singh responsible for his degeneration that led to the Brigadier's death. He takes a gun and decides to kill the Sheikh, at which he discloses the fact that the whole idea of clearing the substandard consignment had originated not with Himmat Singh but with the Minister and the Secretary, and they picked Ratan as a pawn because he was a "spineless flunkey". (136)

Now Ratan realizes, as he says: "...to know good, and to know evil and to choose evil: what greater betrayal of the spirit is there? And who does this choosing. I ask you? Who does this choosing but ourselves. And yet we roam the world, beating our breasts, looking for scapegoats". (142) He had seriously pursued his career and now "... all that was left was a pile of dung" (138) For the first time the memory of his father becomes well pronounced: "*Father, Father, what have I done?*". (138) At the Sheikh's suggestion he decides to kill the Secretary, but give up the idea as that was "too primitive a solution". (141)

Now Ratan wakes up to the fact that there was no cure for the crooked ways of the world; one could only reform oneself. Ratan hasn't lost hope. The Sheikh tells him: "But give it a try. One lost nothing". (147) In his monologue with the student regarding the *Bhagavadgita* he realizes: "There might be births without number awaiting us and a ceaseless accumulation of Karmas but does one not get paid as one goes along, right here, in this birth, in this world?". (91)

Now he firmly decides upon putting himself to social use and

thereby expiate his sin. But the question was as to how to put oneself to social use and to have faith in what kind of God:

The Superintendent's God is no use. Of that I am sure. Whose God then? The God of Kurukshetra? The God of Gandhi? My father's God, in case he had any? And whose revolution? The Russian? The Chinese? The American? My father's? Whose? Could they possibly be the same— Revolution and God? Coinciding at some point on the horizon. (148)

He remembers Gandhi for whom the greatest religion of man was to put oneself to selfless service which only suffering and sacrifice can make possible. Thus, he opts for the ethical choice by which he surrenders his self to God.

Leaving the world to its incorrigible crooked ways, every morning he goes to the temple to wipe the shoes of the congregation and begs forgiveness of all those whom he had harmed deliberately or unknowingly:

I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes on in there. I stand at the doorstep and I say things. Be good, I tell myself. Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness of a large host: my father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed. With deliberation and with cunning, of all those who have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not. (148-49)

Here we find Ratan Rathor in his new avatar—his metamorphosis from Marlowe's Dr. Faustus to Goethe's Faust towards the end. Like Faust and unlike Dr. Faustus, he retrieves his lost soul by putting himself to social use. He recalls his father's words: "Whatever you do touches someone somewhere". (149) His father laid great emphasis on "karma". He now begins to lead his life on the lines of Mahatma Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgita*. Thus, by polishing the shoes of the congregation, he

seeks to rid his heart of the 'bourgeois filth' that had settled all through his pursuit of career.

Ratan begins afresh with a firm faith in life and himself. As Ratan says, "I know it is too late in the day. But one must try and not lose heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair". (149) This is reminiscent of the lines in Tennyson's 'Ulysses': "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Arun Joshi's vision has a deep impact of the *Karmic* principle of the *Gita*: "There is no intervening agent between you and God. What you sow you reap."⁹

Thus, Arun Joshi's greatness resides in his having added an ethical dimension to *The Apprentice* through his moralistic vision of responsible existence. Ratan expresses, the hope that the young generation of the unpolluted listener like him "might yet hold back the tide" (150) if they are "willing to learn from the follies of their elders. Willing to learn and ready to sacrifice. Willing to pay the price". (150) The novel ends at dawn, symbolic of Ratan's transformation and regeneration: "It is a cold dawn. But no matter. A dawn, after all, is a dawn". (150) It is this moral vision that resolves the crisis of values Ratan was facing towards the end of *The Apprentice* that reserves for Joshi a high place in the hierarchy of Indian English writers. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh says:

It is this balanced combination of contemporary experience and aspiration for transcendence that gives Joshi's novel a place of distinction in post-Independence Indian fiction in English.¹⁰

REFERENCES

1. Joshi, Arun. *The Apprentice*, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1974. (All the references given in brackets are from this edition)
2. Ghosh, Tapan Kumar. *Arun Joshi's Fiction: The Labyrinth of Life*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996, p. 90.

Crisis of Values and its Resolution in Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice*

3. Preface to *A Hero of Our Time* by Mikhail Lermontov, quoted by Albert Camus as the epigraph to *The Fall*.
4. Guruprasad, Thakur. "The Lost Lonely Questers of Arun Joshi's Fiction," *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi*, edited by R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1986, p. 162.
5. Anant, Victor. "The Hypnotised People," in *Partisan Review*, 27/2, 1960, pp. 311- 12.
6. Srinath, C.N. "The Fiction of Arun Joshi: The Novel of Interior Landscape," op. cit., p.129.
7. Abraham, Joy. "Vision and Technique in *The Apprentice*," *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi*, op. cit., p. 219.
8. Ghosh, Tapan Kumar. op. cit., p. 115.
9. Mathai, Sujatha. "I'm a Stranger to My Books," op. cit.
10. Ghosh, Tapan Kumar. op. cit., p. 117.